

HIST480 – History Honours Research Paper

“Fascism Alone Will Save This Country”: Presentations of Decline, Rebirth and the Enemy in the Newspapers of the British Union of Fascists

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This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA Honours in History at the University of Canterbury. This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author in the footnote references. The dissertation is approximately 9,055 words in length.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the ways in which the two main newspapers of the British Union of Fascists ('BUF'), *Action* and *the Blackshirt*, presented ideas of social decline, the need for regeneration and the enemy. It builds on the theoretical scholarship of Roger Griffin and Robert Paxton, who highlight the fascist obsession with social decline and the need for rebirth, using archival evidence to analyse these theories in practice, in an English language context. It demonstrates a high level of correlation between Griffin and Paxton's analysis and the practices of the BUF. By examining *Action* and *the Blackshirt*, the paper highlights the BUF's ongoing obsession with decline and regeneration, and analyses the idea of the enemy, or who was presented as responsible for social decline. It discusses the purpose of these presentations, and highlights changes over time. In particular it demonstrates a rhetorically changing treatment of Jews over time, and provides potential explanations for these changes. The paper seeks to provide wider insight into the mechanics and function in practice of fascist propaganda.

Contents

Chapter One – Introduction.....	4
Chapter Two – Presentations of Decline	9
Chapter Three – Presentations of Regeneration	18
Chapter Four – The Enemy	21
Chapter Five – Conclusions	29

Chapter One – Introduction

The British Union of Fascists ('BUF'), led by Sir Oswald Mosley, emerged into an uncertain political and economic situation in Britain in 1933. The previous Labour government had resigned in 1931, replaced by a new National Coalition government made up of members of the three main parties. Unemployment soared in Britain, especially in key industries such as textiles, coal and shipbuilding. The BUF quickly gained momentum, with up to 40,000 members joining by mid-1934.¹ Drawing both influence and funding from Italian and German fascist counterparts,² the BUF was able to establish and publish a number of propaganda newspapers from 1933 through to 1940, when Oswald Mosley and other senior leaders of the party were imprisoned by the British Government during World War Two. These newspapers provide a large body of reference material, which illustrate the BUF's beliefs, and the rhetorical techniques and strategies they used in an effort to appeal to the British public. The BUF archive constitutes perhaps the largest such volume of any fascist group published in the English language.

There is an extensive historiography surrounding the British Union of Fascists. Several useful historiographical essays which provide a broad background on the subject exist, including those written by Jakub Drabik³ and Nedra McCloud.⁴ Early works on the BUF focused on providing general histories of the party, along with explanations for the group's failure to achieve the success of fascist movements in Italy and Germany. This discussion around reasons for failure has evolved and continues today. Another strong area of publication is general histories of fascism in the UK. These works often focus on the BUF (the largest interwar fascist group in Britain) but also provide a background and context for wider fascist movements in Britain.⁵ There have been a number of biographies published also, focusing

¹ Stuart Rawnsley, "The Membership of the British Union of Fascists" in *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain* Kenneth Lunn and Richard Thurlow ed. (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 165.

² Gary Love, "'What's the Big Idea?': Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 no. 3 (2007): 447–468.

³ Jakub Drabik, "Historiographical Essay – British Union of Fascists," *Contemporary British History*, 2016.

⁴ Nedra McCloud "Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists: A Brief Historiographical Inquiry," *History Compass* 4 no. 4 (2016): 687–697.

⁵ Martin Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!": Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars*. (London: Pimlico, 2006); Robert Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 1972).

not just on Oswald Mosley but also on other key figures in the BUF.⁶ A small but significant number of works, including a general history of the BUF, have been authored by past members of the BUF such as J. A. Miller, John Bellamy and John Millican. The late 1980s saw two studies which provide greater insight into the BUF's membership numbers and demographics.⁷ From this period also there has been an increase in works focusing on cultural⁸ and women's⁹ histories of the BUF, along with studies discussing the BUF's ideological basis.¹⁰ The same period has seen publication of articles and books covering a diverse range of topics including sports,¹¹ violence,¹² uniforms and symbols,¹³ anti-Semitism¹⁴ and music.¹⁵

⁶ Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: MacMillan, 1975); Matthew McMurray, "Alexander Raven Thomson, Philosopher of the British Union of Fascists," *European Legacy* 17, no. 1 (2012): 33-59; Mary Kenny, *Germany Calling: A Personal Biography of William Joyce, 'Lord Haw-Haw'* (Dublin: New Island, 2003).

⁷ Stuart Rawnsley, "The Membership of the British Union of Fascists," in *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain*, ed. Kenneth Lunn and Richard Thurlow (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 150-166; G. C. Webber, "Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 4 (1984): 575-606; John Brewer, "Looking Back at Fascism: A Phenomenological Analysis of BUF Membership," *The Sociological Review* 32, no. 4 (1984): 742-760.

⁸ Michael Spurr, "Living the Blackshirt Life: Culture, Community and the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940," *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 3 (2003): 305-322; Thomas Linehan and Julie Gottlieb *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004).

⁹ Stephen Cullen, "Four Women for Mosley: Women in the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940," *Oral History* 24 no. 1 (1996): 49-59; Martin Durham, "Women and the British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940," *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora* 8 no. 2 (1989): 2-18; Kerry Killin, "Women and British Fascism," *Modern History Review* 4 (1993): 21-23; Julie Gottlieb, "Women and Fascism in the East End," in *Remembering Cable Street: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Society*, ed. Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2000), 31-50; Julie Gottlieb, "Women and British Fascism Revisited: Gender, the Far-Right, and Resistance," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 3 (2004): 108-123

¹⁰ Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism, 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Love, *What's the Big Idea?*; David Baker, *Ideology of Obsession: A.K. Chesterton and British Fascism* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996); Stephen Cullen, "The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40," *Journal of Contemporary History* 22, no. 1 (1987): 115-136

¹¹ Michael Spurr, "'Playing for Fascism': Sportsmanship, Anti-Semitism and the British Union of Fascists," *Patterns of Prejudice* 37, no. 4 (2003): 359-376.

¹² Daniel Tilles, "Bullies or Victims? A Study of British Union of Fascists Violence," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 3 (2006): 327-346; Stephen Cullen, "Political Violence: The Case of the British Union of Fascists," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 2 (1993): 245-267; Jon Lawrence, "Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-War Britain: The Olympia Debate Revisited," *Historical Research* 76, no. 192 (2003): 238-267.

¹³ Jon Millican, *Mosley's Men in Black: Uniforms, Flags and Insignia of the British Union of Fascists 1932-1940 & Union Movement* (London: Brockingday, 2005).

¹⁴ Daniel Tilles, *British Fascist Antisemitism and Jewish Responses, 1932-40*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁵ Graham Macklin, "'Onward Blackshirts!' Music and the British Union of Fascists," *Patterns of Prejudice* 47 no 2 (2013): 430-457.

Two key texts have emerged since the early 1990s which seek to define fascism, especially in terms of what separates it from other ultra-right and nationalist ideologies. In *The Nature of Fascism*, Roger Griffin seeks to identify “a common core of fascist phenomena which can be treated as its definitional minimum.”¹⁶ Through his research, he arrives at a definition of fascism as “a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism.”¹⁷ He clarifies that in this definition, “palingenesis refers to the sense of a new start or a regeneration after a phase of crisis or decline.”¹⁸ Following this theme, Robert Paxton also highlights the centrality of ideas of decline to fascist ideology in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, arguing that “fascism may be defined as a form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood and by compensatory cults of energy, unity and purity.”¹⁹ Paxton goes on to list what he considers to be the key ‘mobilising passions’ of all fascist movements. Included in this short list is “a sense of overwhelming crisis, beyond the reach of any traditional solutions”, and “dread of the group’s decline under the corrosive effects of individual liberalism, class conflict and alien influences.”²⁰

Despite this extensive historiography covering the BUF, the many recent works published on the topic suggest that the subject is far from exhausted.²¹ Additionally, relatively little attention has been directed to the propaganda of the BUF.²² This research paper seeks to apply Griffin and Paxton’s insights as to the fascist obsession with decline and renewal to the propaganda newspaper publications of the British Union of Fascists. The purpose of the investigation is not, however, to weigh the palingenetic themes of the BUF in consideration of whether the organisation can be considered a ‘true’ example of fascism. The BUF’s name, presentation and self-conscious use of fascist identity establishes firmly these credentials. Rather, it is completed with a view to exploring and presenting the rhetoric and themes

¹⁶ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

¹⁷ Griffin, 33.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage, 2005)

²⁰ Paxton, 41.

²¹ Macklin, ““Onward Blackshirts!” Music and the British Union of Fascists’; Jon Risdon, *Black Shirt and Smoking Beagles: The Biography of Wilfred Risdon: An Unconventional Campaigner* (London: Wilfred Books, 2013); Tilles, ‘Bullies or Victims? A Study of British Union of Fascists Violence.’; Lewis Young, “Fascism for the British Audience,” *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 3, no. 2 (2014): 93–116.

²² Jakub Drabik, “Spreading the Faith – the Propaganda of the British Union of Fascists,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 25 no. 2, (2017): 211.

used by the BUF in their every-day presentations of decline and rebirth. As one of the most significant fascist groups publishing in English, understanding the way these ideas are constructed and presented by the BUF is useful in identifying and further exploring this idea, as it relates to fascism generally. Chiara Ferrari makes a strong argument as to why this type of analysis of fascist rhetoric remains important in her analysis of Italian fascism, stating that “the resistance to granting legibility to fascist rhetoric continues to handicap our understanding of the historical experience and its significance for the culture and politics of modern Italy. Without such legibility we ultimately curtail the possibility of recognising and effectively opposing neo-fascist movements.”²³ It is in this spirit, applied to the British context, that the current study is undertaken. This dissertation therefore focuses on presentations of decline and regeneration in both the *Blackshirt* and *Action*, propaganda newspapers published by the British Union of Fascists from 1933 to 1940. It highlights the way in which ideas of decline and regeneration were presented, and discusses changes throughout the publication history. It further seeks to analyse the forms in which regeneration is proposed, and the parties and factors to which the BUF attaches blame for decline.

The Blackshirt, first published in February 1933, began as a four page monthly newspaper, increasing to weekly publication by June 1933 and to twelve pages from 1 June 1934. *Action* was launched as a sixteen page weekly newspaper on 21 February 1936, and was pitched at “recruiting new members and maintaining links with BUF sympathisers”, using a popular style of journalism and including reporting on sports fixtures and films.²⁴ With the launch of *Action*, the *Blackshirt* took on a new focus, primarily “targeted at card-carrying members of the movement, particularly active members in Division 1 and Division 2 Blackshirts.”²⁵ The BUF published several other short-lived propaganda newspapers, such as *the East London Pioneer* and *The Fascist Monthly*, however due to their extended publication histories and large volume of content, *the Blackshirt* and *Action* are the central focus of this paper.

²³ Chiara Ferrari, “Discursive ritual and sacrificial presentation: The rhetoric of crisis and resolution in fascist Italy,” *the Italianist*, 23 no. 1 (2003): 125.

²⁴ “Action”, British Online Archives, Microform Publishers, accessed 6 October 2019, <https://microform.digital/boa/collections/9/volumes/64/action>.

²⁵ “the Blackshirt”, British Online Archives, Microform Publishers, accessed 6 October 2019, <https://microform.digital/boa/collections/9/volumes/62/the-blackshirt>.

In order to complete the analysis, digitised copies of *the Blackshirt* and *Action*, hosted online via the British Online Archive were reviewed. This review entailed a close reading of all editions of *the Blackshirt* from No. 1 (published February 1933) through to No. 41 (published February 2nd 1933), along with the first copy of both *the Blackshirt* and *Action* for each month throughout the publication history. This reading served to establish the key themes, language and keywords which were used by the BUF's writers and columnists in their presentation of various aspects of decline and the associated necessity for regeneration, and provided the basis for optical character recognition (OCR) keyword searches within the database. It was established that in most cases, articles which presented ideas of decline included the keywords 'decline' or 'decay', whilst palingenetic ideas were often presented with keywords 'revolution' and 'regeneration'. These terms were used for the OCR search of the entire publication history of *the Blackshirt* and *Action*. Through this, the various themes and identified causes of decline, along with palingenetic 'calls to action' in response to this supposed decline, were highlighted - as discussed in detail below.

There are several advantages to using digitised copies of these publication in this study. Firstly, the sources are easily accessible and searchable, which lends itself to in depth analysis. Secondly, as official publications, the newspapers can be taken to represent the views and opinions of the Party, and include articles from senior party figures including Sir Oswald Mosley, Alexander Raven Thompson and AK Chesterton. The inclusion of letters from the public and BUF membership in these publications also provides insights into the concerns of the BUF's membership and sympathisers, and shows the ways in which they interacted with the propaganda published. Finally, the extended publication period available, from the first issue of *the Blackshirt* in February 1933 through to the final issue of *Action* in June 6 1940, provides an opportunity to explore how the discussion of these ideas, and especially who or what was held responsible for social decline, developed over the BUF's history. By correlating these changes with already established changes in BUF membership, funding sources and general public perception, they can be situated in the wider social context.

There are also limitations to the research methodology employed. Firstly, OCR technology has acknowledged limitations and imperfections, which means a chance that articles which do contain relevant keywords may be missed due to OCR error. Additionally, reliance on keyword searches means that articles which are relevant to the theme of the analysis undertaken may be missed if they do not include relevant keywords.²⁶ Finally, both newspapers analysed were published for propaganda purposes. This raises questions as to the degree to which the ideas presented were included with a view towards populist appeal, and to what extent they did in fact reflect official BUF policy.

Chapter Two – Presentations of Decline

Perhaps unsurprisingly given Griffin and Paxton's observations on the nature of fascist movements, the newspapers of the British Union of Fascists present ideas of 'decline' and 'decay', and the consequent need for 'rebirth' and 'regeneration' constantly, and in all issues. The front page sub-headline in the first issue of *the Blackshirt* from February 1933 runs "Drastic Action or Disaster."²⁷ There is a degree of variation, but always the central theme remains. The overall intention is to create an impression of a fractured, broken and irreparably flawed society, which can only be set right again through fascist revolution, followed by the rule of the BUF under a Mosley led corporate state.

One of the most common and persistent ways decline is presented in *the Blackshirt* and *Action* is by constant reference to society's overall decline, without directly providing any specifics, evidence or further information to support the claims being made. It is rather taken as a given that British society is in a crisis state of decay. Such claims are indirectly 'supported' by many other articles which do include facts and figures in relation to economic and social decline which are also included frequently in both publications. Examples of this idea of general decline include phrases such as "a disease corrupting the State";²⁸ the public "remains in a state of apathy while England crumbles into decay";²⁹

²⁶ Adrian Bingham, "The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians," *Twentieth Century British History*, 21 no. 2 (2010): 225–231.

²⁷ *The Blackshirt* #1, February 1933, 1.

²⁸ *The Blackshirt* #5, 17 April 1933, 3.

²⁹ *The Blackshirt* #53, 27 April 1934, 2.

“today man faces one of the many crises of history”;³⁰ “We Prepare for the Fight Against Decay”;³¹ and “never before has the world seen Britain so weak.”³²

A. K. Chesterton, frequent columnist for both *Blackshirt* and *Action* and BUF Director of Propaganda up to 1936, was a frequent practitioner of this type of writing about the general decay of society. His view is demonstrated by one example published in March 1935: “The plight of Britain is desperate and we look to the individual in charge of her destiny, only to find in him no symptom of a man but a wordcrazed nincompoop fiddling with his tongue while every vital achievement of the British race burns away to nothingness and every aspiration for the future is betrayed.”³³ There has evidently been no improvement in Chesterton’s outlook by February the following year, when he writes “On every hand we find simpering fools subsidised to gush and puke the message of decadence over all the land. The catch-phrases, by constant repetition, eat their way into the soul of a virile people to suck the life out of them, in order that the jackal lords may revel amidst decay. The British Empire is allowed to disintegrate, and everything that is of value in the British tradition to die.”³⁴

This theme of general decay is shared in the speeches of both Oswald Mosley and his wife Diana, which are frequently transcribed or reported on in both newspapers. Sir Oswald states the need to “cut away the evil”,³⁵ while Lady Diana urges haste in bringing the BUF to power, in order that “Britain and our empire could be saved from decline.”³⁶ It appears from the readers’ letters pages that many BUF members shared these same preoccupations with society’s general decline. For example, June 16th 1933’s *Blackshirt* features two letters from readers. One states that “England, too, is mortally sick,”³⁷ while another complains “As I deliberate a while on the Britain of today and the Britain of yesterday, it almost makes my Celtic blood run cold at the very thought of what the Britain of tomorrow would be.”³⁸

³⁰ *The Blackshirt* #63, 6 July 1934, 3.

³¹ *The Blackshirt* #69, 10 August 1934, 2.

³² *The Blackshirt* #193, 2 January 1937, 8

³³ *The Blackshirt* #98 8 March 1935, 4.

³⁴ *The Blackshirt* #148 28 February 1936, 3.

³⁵ *The Blackshirt* #143 24 May 1935, 5

³⁶ *The Blackshirt* #91 18 January 1935, 2.

³⁷ *The Blackshirt* #9, 16 June 1933, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Through all of these examples, we see presentations of ‘general’ or unspecified decline which are commonplace throughout *Action* and *the Blackshirt*. Such presentations are used in combination with articles highlighting more specific areas of perceived decline, including prevalent themes of economic, social, and health decline.

A key way in which the BUF’s publications attempted to portray the decline of British society was through continuous reporting on economic decline. Again, this is perhaps unsurprising given the global economic situation in the early 1930s, which provided the backdrop to the BUF’s establishment. Such coverage of economic decline ranged from general (“Decline in Nearly All Industries”,³⁹ “Home Industries Languish”,⁴⁰ “British Industry Faces Ruin”⁴¹) to incredibly specific (“Price for Bacon Pigs Touches Bedrock.”⁴²) There was a focus on unemployment as a sign of economic decline, as well as a great deal of coverage devoted to specific industries. Many articles on economic decline highlighted specific month-by-month statistics showing falls in export volume, rises in unemployment, or fluctuations in wages, as examples proving the overall argument that the economy was going downhill. This careful selection of statistics is highlighted in one column from August 1935: “Board of Trade figures show a further decline in exports of £2,600,000 compared with May figures. I think in almost every one of the thirty-four weeks I have been contributing this column, I have been able to give at least one set of official figures of this kind.”⁴³ Another favourite technique was the use of personal accounts and anecdotes which highlight the misery of those suffering under the poor economic conditions. Through these types of articles we meet the “Tramp Girls of Lancashire,”⁴⁴ the farmer who has lost his farm due to Government policy, the London worker who upon witnessing a fatal car accident is left wishing that he were the victim, so that “at least my wife could have been sure of the pension,”⁴⁵ and learn of the “Poverty! Misery! Hunger! Dirt!” experienced by the workers of the Trimdon Colliery.⁴⁶

³⁹ *The Blackshirt* #95, 15 February 1935, 2.

⁴⁰ *The Blackshirt* #136, 29 November 1935, 3.

⁴¹ *The Blackshirt* #89, 4 January 1935, 4.

⁴² *The Blackshirt* #133, 8 November 1935, 6.

⁴³ *The Blackshirt* #119, 2 August 1935, 3.

⁴⁴ *The Blackshirt* #100, 22 March 1935, 2.

⁴⁵ *The Blackshirt* #143, 17 January 1936, 3.

⁴⁶ *The Blackshirt* #130, October 18 1935, 6.

Economic coverage remains a central focus of both newspapers. Robert Skidelsky argues in his biography of Mosley that “Sir Oswald Mosley’s formation of the British Union of Fascists can be seen as an attempt to revolutionise the British political structure by curing the crucial problem of unemployment through implementation of the ideas of an authoritarian moderniser.”⁴⁷ However, it is worth noting that in many ways the British economy recovered strongly from the Depression. The country averaged 5% annual GDP growth from 1933 to 1938, which one economist has called “quite considerable, particularly in relation to that of most leading capitalist economies.”⁴⁸ While unemployment had risen from 10% in 1929 to more than 20% by early 1933, it had fallen to 13.9% by January 1936 and continued to decline through the years of the BUF’s existence. In the face of this improving economic picture, the BUF was forced into a somewhat contrarian position. When unemployment increased month on month or in specific industries, such as farm workers over winter, this fact was heralded within the BUF’s newspapers. However when unemployment decreased, this was either left unmentioned or in one case written off as “merely statistical,”⁴⁹ and the columnists’ criticism focused instead on the types of jobs available now, rather than unemployment generally. This approach is mirrored in coverage of Mosley’s speech at the infamous Olympia rally, where the Leader simply rejects the argument that the economy is improving.⁵⁰ Similarly there are many examples of *Action* and *the Blackshirt* articles which re-print statistics showing short term decline, or decline within particular industries, rather than the overall improving economic picture. This was a potentially fruitful propaganda tactic. Despite the overall economic recovery, the 1930s were a time of major structural change in the British economy.⁵¹ Traditional industries, such as coal and textiles, were declining, replaced by a transition to focus on consumer goods, and strong growth in industries such as construction and car manufacturing.

The BUF responded to these structural changes by shining their propaganda newspaper spotlight on these traditional industries, and the localities in which they had previously

⁴⁷ Kenneth Lunn and Richard Thurlow, *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain*, (London: Croom-Helm, 1980), 15.

⁴⁸ Forrest Capie and Michael Collins, “The Extent of British Economy Recovery in the 1930s,” *Economics and History*, 23 no. 1 (1980): 40-60.

⁴⁹ *The Blackshirt* #59, 8 June 1934, 4.

⁵⁰ *The Blackshirt* #60, 15 June 1934, 1.

⁵¹ Capie and Collins, “The Extent of British Economic Recovery in the 1930s”

flourished, in its effort to paint a picture of Britain's decay. The purpose of this discussion of industry specific decline is to tie specific instances to wider or overall problems, in order to convince the reader of a national crisis. A typical example is a column which argues that "the decay of national life, which fascism sets out to arrest, is vividly seen in the shipping industry. Unemployment, low wages, falling freight, decline and decay everywhere."⁵² The four industries most commonly used in *Action* and *the Blackshirt* as examples of decline are textiles, agriculture, coal and shipping. In addition to statistics presented which show declining textile exports from Britain and ground lost to Japanese textile manufacturers, we hear also about the "endless misery" and "heart-sickening sights" of Lancashire textile mills closing their doors.⁵³ Again, much of the BUF's focus is on the many regional effects of industry-specific decline, which feeds into the argument that it is not just an economic issue, but one which has wider effects which are tearing at the very fabric of society, and necessitating a fight for survival. This approach to covering specific industries provides headlines such as "Black Prospect for Lancashire"⁵⁴, "Lancashire Towns Sink Into Depression"⁵⁵ and "Lancashire is Facing Another Crisis"⁵⁶, along with similar articles regarding Liverpool and its shipyards, the coal fields of South Wales and the steel industry in Sheffield.

Agricultural decline is another primary focus of the BUF's publications, with a 'Farmers Diary' column running weekly in *the Blackshirt* and then *Action*, which appears to have had the sole purpose of cataloguing each of the problems facing British agriculture, which are responsible for its decline. This is manifested through diverse short articles covering amongst many other things the reduced position of oat growers,⁵⁷ beef and butter decline,⁵⁸ falling cheese and wheat prices⁵⁹ and the impact of imported Chinese eggs on the local market.⁶⁰ Aside from its place in the project of creating a picture of overall social decline as discussed above, this emphasis on agriculture must also be understood in the context of the

⁵² *The Blackshirt* #23, 30 September 1933, 2.

⁵³ *The Blackshirt* #108 17 May 1935, 2.

⁵⁴ *The Blackshirt* #141, 3 January 1936, 1.

⁵⁵ *The Blackshirt* #145, 31 January 1936, 3.

⁵⁶ *The Blackshirt* #104, 18 April 1935, 1.

⁵⁷ *The Blackshirt* #144, January 24 1936, 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ *The Blackshirt* #91, January 18 1935, 9.

ideological place of the idyllic British countryside in the mythos of the BUF. In this, the self-sufficient yeoman farmer is presented as the ideal Briton (“the independent yeoman spirit is the backbone of our race”⁶¹) and the decline of this traditional British agricultural identity can be viewed as representative of the perceived wider loss of British identity and way of life.

Supposed social and cultural decline is written about in many of the same ways as economic decline. The newspapers of the BUF feature many columns attacking an overall or general social decline, mixed with examples which decry specific areas of decline, such as the theatre, films, the environment, patriotism, intellectualism and spirituality. A. K. Chesterton once again excels at this type of writing, in one column attacking “a world of mental weaklings, cut off from contact with reality lest they should learn to think about that reality and of the matriarchal principle which flourishes upon their present ignorance, by keeping the wolves at their door. A world of spiritual degenerates, seeking annihilation in democratic fantasies because the facts of waking life are too strong for them, indicating the need for a struggle of a magnitude that assails and overwhelms their souls, causing them to fly for comfort to the mother's lap.”⁶² One year later the same theme remains, when Chesterton argues that:

“Men and women throughout the ages have been burningly aware of the shape of the native landscape, of the savour of their native soil, of the traditions grown, sprung from collective effort and from dangers shared. When this sense of kinship and of nationhood decays, the stock decays at the same time, and at only a slightly slower rate. And upon this decay every absurdity builds its throne and assumes its crown. Thus today, with gigantic problems unsolved at home, the politicians of all parties cover their incompetence and cowardice by proclaiming a desire to solve problems abroad. Thus hearts go out to the Basques and their palsied minds swoon with sympathy for the Chinks, while lip-service alone is paid to the desperate plight of the British people, who are rapidly being cut adrift from any possible survival basis by this

⁶¹ *The Blackshirt* #259, March 1939, 4.

⁶² *Action* #21, 9 July 1936, 9.

brazen refusal of leadership to legislate in the name of national honour and of national need.”⁶³

In both examples we see near apocalyptic predictions as a result of social decay. Closely linked to this theme are articles which refer to the moral decline of society, arguing that Britain has become a society which “lacks a fixed standard of moral values”⁶⁴, where “social crimes are now ignored”⁶⁵ and “alien criminals flourish like fat slugs.”⁶⁶

Cultural decline, including the decline of cultural productions such as books, theatre and film are another frequent point of criticism in the pages of *Blackshirt* and *Action*. It is argued both that “only under a fascist government can the national theatre be redeemed from the sordid decline into which it has fallen,”⁶⁷ and that “the English working man, indeed, may be deprived of culture; he may be starving for it, as he starves for much else: but he cannot be transformed into a synthetic Jew or a Negro comedian as can so many of the others. That a great revival of our real old national culture, that which there is no greater in the world, is needed we know. That the nation cannot otherwise free itself every man must believe.”⁶⁸

Each issue of *Action* features one page of theatre, film and book reviews, which exist to either promote books and films which support the fascist world view, such as reviews of Mussolini’s autobiography: “here we can read a great mind at first-hand and watch the growth of a new order of civilisation while the story of chaos and decay, resurgence and regeneration of a great people unfolds itself”,⁶⁹ or to attack those works which are viewed as exemplifying the decline of Britain and western civilisation generally.

The mainstream media of the time is another topic of frequent criticism and attack. “What a low ebb have some of the less reputable newspapers in the country sunk,”⁷⁰ complains one article. Another highlights the desire of the mainstream press to “publish pornography,

⁶³ *The Blackshirt* #234, 23 October 1937, 1.

⁶⁴ *The Blackshirt* #58, 1 June 1934, 7.

⁶⁵ *The Blackshirt* #15, 5 August 1933, 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *The Blackshirt* #130, 18 October 1935, 5.

⁶⁸ *Action* #12, 7 May 1936, 6.

⁶⁹ *Action* #2, Feb 28 1936, 7.

⁷⁰ *The Blackshirt* #4, 1 April 1933, 3.

revel in rape and sensationalise seduction.”⁷¹ *Action* #54 of February 27 1937 features a column entitled *Confessions of an English Dope Eater*, a parody of Thomas de Quincy’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, in which the ‘dope’ being eaten is the mainstream newspapers of the day. Upon breaking his addiction to the ‘dope’, the protagonist wakes up to a new reality in which “down and down the Hill of Sloth slid Great Britain. Decay, corruption, and decadence. The Dominions seceded. And fell before the Red Beast. The great fruit in the East festered, diseased from within. And was overrun and lost. In my weakness I wept to see Great Britain fall.”⁷² The coverage ranges from general to specific, highlighting decline. As always, the reader is pushed towards the conclusion that British society is at its lowest.

One final theme of decline frequently presented in *Action* and *the Blackshirt* is the idea of Britain’s declining health and masculinity. There are many references to the idea that Britain has become a ‘C3 nation’. This was the classification given to those judged physically unfit to serve in the First World War. The Government is blamed for a system which “allows the physique and morale of our young manhood to deteriorate to such an extent that we are now labelled C3.”⁷³ Health and masculinity are closely linked, as in an article complaining of the physical deterioration and undernourishment of the populace, which results in “a million unfit men.”⁷⁴ The loss of the physically fit ideal male is constantly derided, in connection with and as an underlying cause of, general social decline. In the Britain of the 1930s, they claim, “weakness is extolled and strength derided. The flabby broadcast the praises of flabbiness, and would have the once majestic Empire of Britain pass away, leaving behind only a little decaying mess”. A. K. Chesterton asks “what world is it that has grown up during the submergence of the masculine spirit? A world of physical weaklings, denied the life giving properties of sun and air and good wholesome food.”⁷⁵ Both newspapers feature many articles with specifically focused examples, ‘proving’ the general argument of health and masculinity in decline, such as statistics of health problems and malnutrition in Yorkshire and Lancashire. In contrast to this, there is also frequent and ongoing mention of

⁷¹ *The Blackshirt* #13, July 22 1933, 1.

⁷² *Action* #54, 27 February 1937, 14.

⁷³ *The Blackshirt* #98, 8 March 1935, 7.

⁷⁴ *The Blackshirt* #18, 26 August 1933, 4.

⁷⁵ *Action* #21, 9 July 1936, 9.

the ‘virility’ and ‘masculinity’ of the Blackshirt movement whose members, especially Mosley, are held out as counterpoints to this story of “a manhood trained to lisp the language of defeat”⁷⁶ which has supposedly become the norm.

There is a remarkable level of consistency and continuity in the rhetoric of the BUF’s newspapers. All of the themes discussed above appear first in *the Blackshirt* in 1933 and continue through to the last issue of *Action* in 1940. Even a changing economic picture does little to dissuade the BUF’s columnists that the economy is not, in fact, going downhill, and the form and function of the articles included in this regard remain much the same. As a result, it is difficult to identify any major changes in the BUF’s presentations of decline which occurred over the publication history.

There is a self-consciousness or self-awareness involved in these consistent arguments towards Britain being a ‘broken society’. The BUF’s writers and editors are aware that creating the impression of a ruined Britain in need of revolutionary change is a central piece of the organisation’s prospects and ability to appeal to the public. This is clearly demonstrated in the introduction to a weekly column in *Action* titled ‘Searchlight Over Britain’: “In this place will appear each week a survey of current events and of tendencies which in the belief of “Action” indicate the rapid disintegration of the British empire and British people. It will not be required of us that we should attempt to find a mellow style or strike a reassuring note.”⁷⁷ Perhaps even more telling is the instructions given to BUF members in order to help them sell copies of *the Blackshirt* door to door or in the streets, who are encouraged to tell their potential customers that “this is our official paper; in it is laid bare the corruption of our so-called democratic liberty, and the way in which fascism will stop the decay and revitalise the nation.”⁷⁸ This is a fair summary of the intended rhetorical effect of the BUF’s two main newspapers, and clearly demonstrates what Jakub Drabik has already stated: that “there were two discourses in BUF propaganda – the discourse of crisis and the discourse of salvation”.⁷⁹ Having clearly identified the ways in

⁷⁶ *Action* #20, 2 July 1936, 11.

⁷⁷ *Action* #1, 21 February 1936.

⁷⁸ *The Blackshirt* #50, 6 April 1934, 1.

⁷⁹ Jakub Drabik, “Spreading the Faith,” 218.

which the discourse of crisis has been promulgated by *Action* and *The Blackshirt*, it is fitting to turn our attention to the discourse of salvation.

Chapter Three – Presentations of Regeneration

Almost as frequently as they comment on the decline of British society, the newspapers of the BUF attempt to offer the means of salvation and regeneration. There is an easy transition between ideas of decline and regeneration, often in the same article, as exemplified by one paragraph from *the Blackshirt* in 1934: “The fact that our people today are feelingless and inward turned and uncourageous is evidence of our decline. Fascism alone, of all creeds and methods which this age has created, can restore life and hope to Britain by substituting for the misery of chaos the joy of the ordered plan. It is time to abjure the shadows and exult in the sunlight of life. It is time for the trumpets of resurrection to sound throughout the land.”⁸⁰ As is the case with instances of decline, many of the BUF’s references to their ability to provide the answers which will save Britain are general rather than specific. Declarations along the lines that “Fascism alone will save this country,”⁸¹ “Fascism is the only remedy for the evils of today,”⁸² “fascist realism sweeps away the evils of our age,”⁸³ “it is to stop the rot of this decay that fascism comes”⁸⁴ and so forth, are to be found in abundance in most issues of *Action* and *the Blackshirt*, whether used as counterpoints to columns outlining general decay, or standing on their own as motivational or inspirational invocations for the membership. This same spirit is clearly taken up by one member, who signs off his letter to the editor with “Onward Fascism, and put things right!”⁸⁵

The presentations of decline within industry, as discussed in Chapter Two, are frequently used as starting points for discussion of BUF policy, which is then presented as the solution to the decline. For example, the final paragraph of an article complaining of the reduced

⁸⁰ *The Blackshirt* #58, 1 June 1934, 6.

⁸¹ *The Blackshirt* #21, 16 September 1933, 3.

⁸² *The Blackshirt* #63, 6 July 1934, 11.

⁸³ *The Blackshirt* #89, 4 January 1935, 5.

⁸⁴ *The Blackshirt* #134, November 15 1935, 4.

⁸⁵ *The Blackshirt* #23, 14 October 1933, 4.

fortunes of small retailers and shop keepers begins “The Cure – Under a Fascist government...”⁸⁶ When Mosley complains of the decline of British agriculture and the traditional place of the yeoman farmer in British society, he goes on to use the opportunity thus created to declare that, under fascist leadership, “Once again the Yeomen of Britain will return, and within them will live again the spirit of the breed of men who built the Empire and lifted to the heights of history the British name.”⁸⁷ This type of palingenetic promise is used in articles which highlight industry specific decline in the context of the major industries (agriculture, shipping, textiles and coal) mentioned earlier, and is one of the primary ways in which specific BUF policy points, such as protectionism against foreign imports in support of domestic agriculture, or reductions in Russian shipping access to British waters in order to support Britain’s merchant fleet,⁸⁸ are presented within *Action* and *the Blackshirt*. Similarly, when unemployment statistics are discussed, this provides an opportunity to spell out the fascist conception of the unemployment-free corporate state.⁸⁹

The BUF’s frequent complaints of decline and the ills of modern society, combined with its often-discussed dreams of a return to the peak of England’s imperial strength and idyllic ways of life could be interpreted as a nostalgic and conservative search for return to an idealised past. Roger Griffin argues instead that fascism is anti-conservative, seeking to “thrust towards a new type of society.”⁹⁰ In reality, this type of discussion within the BUF’s newspapers serves a different purpose. Griffin suggests that fascist movements are instead seeking to “build rhetorically on the cultural achievements attributed to former, more ‘glorious’ or healthy eras, only to invoke the regenerative ethos which is a pre-requisite for rebirth”.⁹¹ The BUF’s rhetorical strategy of presenting an idealised past, invoking the idea of decline, and using this decline to argue for the necessity of a new start under a fascist government is evidence of this invocation of a regenerative ethos. Rather than a conservative return to the past, the BUF saw itself as a ‘modern movement’, aiming to create a break from the past. This idea is made clear in printed declarations such as: “we

⁸⁶ *The Blackshirt* #150, 6 March 1936, 3.

⁸⁷ *Action* #62, 24 April 1937, 9.

⁸⁸ *The Blackshirt* #139, 5.

⁸⁹ *The Blackshirt* #17, 19 August 1933, 1.

⁹⁰ Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 47.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

seek to introduce a new civilisation to the land we love. We fight also for a rebirth of the spirit. Fascism [...] is the creed of men who have determined that Britain shall live and be great again”⁹² and “fascism is the axe which will destroy the old order! Fascism is the fire which will forge the new!”⁹³

Positive examples from the two ‘successful’ fascist regimes of Europe, Italy and Germany, are often used by the BUF to support their argument as to the regenerative nature of fascism and the corporate state. Carefully selected examples are used to juxtapose the new-found success and recovery from decline of Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany to Britain, such as a front page description of everything achieved under the *fascista* regime,⁹⁴ and the declaration that “Fascism would show itself as a great political power in Britain and that the leader would lead a successful revolution against the forces of anarchy and decay in this country, as Adolf Hitler had in Germany.”⁹⁵

This last quote, from a January 1934 issue of *the Blackshirt*, demonstrates also the revolutionary element contained in the regeneration promised by the British Union of Fascists. In this, we see the “sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions”⁹⁶ which Robert Paxton highlighted as a key fascist ‘mobilising passion’. In the case of Mosley and the BUF, the solutions which are proposed are a clear break from the parliamentary democracy of Britain in the past. They argue often in the pages of their newspapers that the changes to British society which they are proposing are indeed revolutionary. The first headline published in *the Blackshirt* reads “On to Fascist revolution!” and what follows are countless declarations that “Fascism is a revolution with the consent of the people,”⁹⁷ “Fascism means revolution – or it means nothing,”⁹⁸ and “Fascism is a great social revolution.”⁹⁹ The old system of parliamentary liberal democracy, which has

⁹² Oswald Mosley, *Fascism in Britain* (London: British Union of Fascists): 1933): 11, quoted in Stephen Cullen, “The Development of the Ideas and Policy of the British Union of Fascists, 1932-40,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22, no. 1 (1987): 115-136.

⁹³ *The Blackshirt* #152, March 21 1936, 1.

⁹⁴ *The Blackshirt* #5, 17 April 1933, 1.

⁹⁵ *The Blackshirt* #40, 26 January 1934, 3.

⁹⁶ Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 219.

⁹⁷ *The Blackshirt* #115 5 July 1935, 1.

⁹⁸ *The Blackshirt* #100. 22 March 1935, 1.

⁹⁹ *Action* #119 28 May 1938, 13.

been shown to be so ‘decayed’ and so ‘decadent’, must be overturned completely, to be replaced by something supposedly new, better and capable of acting as midwife at the rebirth of British society. This revolutionary sentiment serves also as a call to arms for supporters, encouraging them to take action in support of the fascist cause. *Blackshirt* editor W. J Leaper declares that “revolution can succeed only by attack.”¹⁰⁰

The function of this palingenetic rhetoric is a key component of all fascist movements, and particularly their ability to appeal to followers. Roger Griffin argues that it is “the fascist vision of a vigorous new nation growing out of the destruction of the old system can exert on receptive minds the almost alchemical power to transmute black despair into manic optimism and thus enable a party which promotes this vision to win a substantial mass following.”¹⁰¹ The BUF themselves were aware of the importance of this message for propaganda purposes, declaring that “the Blackshirt takes its place today as a great propaganda weapon to bring to the masses the message of fascist determination, and fascist hope.”¹⁰² It is the combination of the decline thesis to convince readers that something must be changed, and the renewal thesis to convince them that only the BUF is capable of achieving the radical social changes required to put things right, that essentially defines the editorial direction and overall purpose of both newspapers.

Chapter Four – The Enemy

One element which is crucial to understanding the rhetoric of the British Union of Fascists is the idea of the enemy. “Enemies”, Robert Paxton explains, “were central to the anxieties which helped to inflame the fascist world view.”¹⁰³ By identifying enemies, the BUF was identifying those responsible for the perceived decline of British society, and therefore those who would need to be dealt with, in order for the required social regeneration to take place. The pages of *Action* and *the Blackshirt* are never short on enemies, which range from ‘the Old Gang’ and the mainstream press through to Communists, foreigners or foreign

¹⁰⁰ *The Blackshirt* #100. 22 March 1935, 1.

¹⁰¹ Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 39.

¹⁰² *The Blackshirt* #152, March 21 1936, 1.

¹⁰³ Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 36.

countries and the Jews. These enemies, who receive the blame for Britain's 'decline', provide one of the greatest areas of overt change throughout the editorial history. Anti-Semitism rises, and previous enemies are synthesised and conglomerated, to the point that by 1936 the phrase "Jewish controlled financial democracy" is often able to stand in as a place holder to explain all of society's various ills. In order to understand the overall function and rhetoric of the BUF's newspapers it is important to understand how these enemies are discussed and attacked.

A favourite enemy of the BUF is 'the Old Gang'. Generally, this identifier denotes the existing mainstream political parties, and holds them responsible for overseeing Britain's supposed decline. Both *Action* and *the Blackshirt* are explicit in placing blame for social decline on these 'Old Gangs'. One article in *the Blackshirt* argues that "the issue is clear: have the old gangs who have made all of the blunders of the last twenty years to go on until they have bought Britain down to the level of a fifth rate people, destroying the Empire at its heart and condemning its people to an ever decreasing standard of living."¹⁰⁴ A report on a rally in 1935 records the speech of "Mrs Brock Griggs, who followed with a magnificent address on our aims and objectives, and a scathing indictment of the Government and the old gangs in their inability to cure unemployment, and right the economic wrongs that are wracking our people."¹⁰⁵ There is little differentiation in terms of rhetoric between the parties, rather declaring that "the three old parties all line up together."¹⁰⁶ This conglomeration is used by Mosley also, with *the Blackshirt* recording that "He [Mosley] launched a great attack on the whole line up of the old gangs - "Tory, Liberal, Labour and Communist" he said, "they are all alike."¹⁰⁷ Supporters are rallied to fight against these 'Old Gangs', with articles declaring "everywhere we go we must challenge the Old Gang's power"¹⁰⁸ and asking supporters to "help us smash forever the power of the Old Gangs".¹⁰⁹ As always, A. K. Chesterton is at the front-line of the rhetorical fight against the 'Old Gang' of established parties, declaring them "dodderers and political hermaphrodites."¹¹⁰ As with

¹⁰⁴ *The Blackshirt* #67, August 3 1934, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *The Blackshirt* #138, December 13 1935, 8.

¹⁰⁶ *The Blackshirt* #3, March 18, 1933, 2.

¹⁰⁷ *The Blackshirt* #199, February 13 1937, 5.

¹⁰⁸ *The Blackshirt* #128, October 4 1935, 11.

¹⁰⁹ *The Blackshirt* #136, November 29 1935, 8.

¹¹⁰ *Action* #36, October 24, 1936, 11.

presentations of decline, examples from fascist parties already in power in Europe are used in the anti-‘Old Gang’ narrative included in both newspapers, at one point arguing that “never emerged more clearly the distinction between Old Gang economics and constructive Fascist policy.”¹¹¹

Occasionally the mainstream press is also included in this ‘Old Gang’ designation, implying complicity with the perceived failures of Government. September of 1933 sees two separate cartoons published showing the ‘Old Gang’ government and ‘Old Gang’ press working together against the interests of Britain.¹¹² The mainstream media of the time was a frequent target of the BUF’s attacks. AK Chesterton refers to “the poison gas section of the press,”¹¹³ and unfair coverage of the BUF’s membership is often blamed for any misfortune which befalls the party. An ongoing series entitled “Our Press Lords” features full page attacks on *the Daily Herald*,¹¹⁴ *the News Chronicle*,¹¹⁵ *the Daily Telegraph*,¹¹⁶ the Beaverbrook press (including *the Daily Express*, where “alien finance and alien folk dominate”),¹¹⁷ *the Times*¹¹⁸ and *the Morning Post*.¹¹⁹ The series is concluded as follows: “We have now ranged our survey from the internationally controlled Left to the internationally controlled Right. We have seen that the whole of our means of obtaining news is controlled by international vested interests; that while the Jewish population of Britain is .6 per cent, its representation in the control of the press is well over 60 per cent.”¹²⁰

Attacks on *the Daily Mail* are absent throughout the publication history of both *the Blackshirt* and *Action*. This fact perhaps reflects the early support which the BUF received from *the Daily Mail*, which had printed “Hurrah for the Blackshirts”, a column written by owner Lord Rothermere, on 15 January 1934. Rothermere also printed similar positive coverage in his other newspapers, including *the Sunday Dispatch*, which Martin Pugh states

¹¹¹ *The Blackshirt* #10. July 1 1933, 3.

¹¹² *The Blackshirt* #19, September 2 1933, 3; *The Blackshirt* #22, September 23 1933, 3.

¹¹³ *Action* #36, October 24 1936, 11.

¹¹⁴ *The Blackshirt* #150, March 6 1936, 6.

¹¹⁵ *The Blackshirt* #151, March 13 1936, 6.

¹¹⁶ *Action* #7, April 2 1936, 7.

¹¹⁷ *Action* #5, March 19 1936, 4.

¹¹⁸ *Action* #8, April 9 1936, 7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

“acted virtually as a house journal for the movement, offering regular features on 'What the Blackshirts are doing', 'Who's who of leading fascists', and 'prizes for readers' letters in response to the question 'Why I like the Blackshirts'.”¹²¹ The BUF was quick to use this positive coverage in its own newspaper propaganda, declaring that “it says much that such an acknowledged authority on politics as Lord Rothermere should openly advocate his belief in the future of fascism in Britain.”¹²² A letter in the following issue of *the Blackshirt* praises the *Daily Mail*, stating that “Our reply should be “Hurrah for the Daily Mail” for having the courage to defy the alien stranglehold of the British Press.”¹²³ Later in 1934 *the Daily Mail* is again praised as “the Patriotic Daily Mail”, which has “helped break the Press boycott” of the BUF.¹²⁴ The *Daily Mail*'s overt positive coverage of the BUF ceased later in 1934. There is debate amongst scholars as to whether this was a result of the negative coverage received by the BUF following the disorder at Olympia, or whether other factors played a greater role, such as the BUF's plan to run candidates at upcoming elections, which may have taken votes away from Conservative candidates.¹²⁵ However, Lord Rothermere remained in some ways a supporter, stating in one post-Olympia letter to Mosley which was reprinted in *the Blackshirt*: “you have a unique gift of personal appeal, and the assistance which I have rendered you was given in the hope that you would be prepared to ally yourself with the Conservative forces to defeat Socialism at the next and succeeding election. Notwithstanding your letter, I do not see why we should not come together on the foregoing lines. I am quite sure that if you and your followers would take my advice in this matter great success will attend them and their Leader.”¹²⁶

Another primary enemy and frequent subject of the BUF's rhetorical attacks within *the Blackshirt* and *Action* were the Communists and Socialists of the far left. There is constant and frequent coverage of ‘the Reds’; from discussion of the Communist Party of Great Britain's (‘CPGB’) policy and internal developments, through to articles highlighting the affairs of Russia and COMINTERN. These attacks on Communists and Socialists are clear and

¹²¹ Pugh, “The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,” 535.

¹²² *The Blackshirt* #39, January 19 1934, 1.

¹²³ *The Blackshirt* #40, January 26 1934, 4.

¹²⁴ *The Blackshirt* #46, March 9 1934, 2.

¹²⁵ Pugh, “The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,” 535.

¹²⁶ *The Blackshirt* #65, July 20 1934, 2.

overt in highlighting them as a main enemy for Mosley's fascists, with many declarations along the lines that "Fascism in Britain is anti-Communist and naturally the Reds don't like us"¹²⁷ and "Fascism has arisen in Britain to combat the menace of Red anarchy."¹²⁸ As with other enemies, it is made clear that the solution under a Fascist government would be to rid Britain of the problem. Articles state that "it was high time the Reds were taught a lesson"¹²⁹ and "we shall meet and defeat Red force with the counter-force of Fascism!"¹³⁰ Along similar lines are articles which celebrate the treatment of communists and socialists in Germany under Hitler's leadership, such as the suppression of the KPD and imprisonment of its leadership.¹³¹ This coverage of the affairs of the far left and their frequent attacks at times borders on obsessive – from July to December 1937 there are 197 mentions of 'Communists' and 462 of 'the Reds' in *Action*.

The animosity between the far left and the fascists was mutual and manifested in many direct confrontations occurring when the two sides met. Many anti-fascist organisations established in Britain in the period had strong ties to far left parties such as the CPGB.¹³² The CPGB also played a leading role in the organisation and promotion of 'popular front' anti-fascism, as directed by the Comintern, from August 1935 onwards.¹³³ The CPGB's anti-fascism was "belligerent, had a tendency towards direct confrontation with fascism and seemed to have a clear focus on the nature of the fascist threat."¹³⁴ This gives rise to a somewhat contradictory dichotomy, wherein those Communists and Socialists involved in opposition to BUF rallies are attacked variously in the newspapers of the BUF as being both pink, intellectual cowards¹³⁵ and uncivilised, violent thugs.¹³⁶

¹²⁷ *The Blackshirt* #10, July 1 1933, 1.

¹²⁸ *The Blackshirt* #33, December 9 1933, 3.

¹²⁹ *The Blackshirt* #21, 16 September 1933, 1.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *The Blackshirt* #13 July 22 1933, 1.

¹³² Thomas Linehan, "Communist Culture and Anti-Fascism in Inter-War Britain," in *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period*. Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 31-51.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³⁵ *The Blackshirt* #72, 7 September 1934, 12; *The Blackshirt* #82, 16 November 1934, 10.

¹³⁶ *The Blackshirt* #93, 1 February 1935, 2; *Action* #127, July 23 1938, 13.

The earlier issues of the newspapers of the BUF go out of their way to declare that the BUF is not an anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic organisation. There are four editorial notes included in issues of *the Blackshirt* published from April to July 1933 which explicitly state this fact.¹³⁷ However, by 1936 the Jewish people of Britain and abroad have emerged as a primary enemy of the BUF. In 1934 there are only 22 mentions of 'Jew' or 'Jews' in *the Blackshirt*. By 1936 there are 128, rising to a peak of 141 in 1937. There is a weekly column entitled 'The Jews Again' published in *Blackshirt* from February 1935 onwards, which highlights all of the many evils and treacheries supposedly perpetrated by Jewish people, such as penetrating and dominating the governments of America and Russia.¹³⁸ The idea of a Jewish controlled world is promoted and decried, and numerous anti-Semitic conspiracy theories such as *the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are presented as fact. From May 1937, perhaps to further dehumanise, the word 'Jew' is no longer capitalised. Clearly this turn to anti-Semitism resonates with at least one reader, who writes a letter to the editor to encourage fellow members to read *Communism with the Mask Off*, an "admirable pamphlet" written by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, which:

rends asunder the veil that conceals the International Jewish Intrigue in its many forms and guises for world domination. In these days when the masses of our people are condemned to endure misery and want, through the machinations of Jewish finance, and when the escape from the realities and hardships of life is being made easier and cheaper day by day in the form of demoralising amusements by the self-same race, one begins to realise, indeed, the many and varied ways by which this people, working under the cover of darkness, elected by none and responsible to none, are undermining and rotting away the very roots of our national greatness so that they may use and convert to their own debased ends the downfall of the social order of our beloved country.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ *The Blackshirt* #7, 18 May 1933, 2; *The Blackshirt* #10, 1 July 1933, 4; *The Blackshirt* #16, 12 August 1933, 3; *The Blackshirt* #23, 30 September 1933, 1.

¹³⁸ *The Blackshirt* #93, 1 February 1935, 2.

¹³⁹ *The Blackshirt* #143, 17 January 1936, 7.

In this letter we see also an example of the way in which Jewish influence is attached by the BUF to all those parties and influences which they consider their enemy. The 'Old Gang Press' of 1933-34 becomes 'the Jewish press'. Jewish Cabinet Minister Leslie Hore-Berisha is frequently criticised as a representative of all that is wrong with the then-current Old Gang government, and the supposed Jewish control of communism, along with the Jewish-ness of Karl Marx, are often cited. By 1937, Mosley asks "Is it pure coincidence that Jews are prominent in international finance and prominent also in the control of the Socialist and Communist parties?"¹⁴⁰

The shift from overt declarations against anti-Semitism to hateful attacks upon all Jews appears to be an about-face change of direction for the BUF. However, such a change may in fact be more superficial than substantial, and represent only a transition from using implicit, dog-whistle language to attack Jewish people, to using explicit and overt language for these attacks. We see here Roger Eatwell's idea of the difference between fascists' esoteric practices, or what they actually did and believed, and the exoteric, or what was considered wise to say in public.¹⁴¹ Even prior to abandoning the pretence of not being anti-Semitic, *the Blackshirt* frequently published articles complaining of 'alien' influences, and complaining of "the great financial houses of the city, controlled as they are by alien forces."¹⁴² Jakob Drabik has suggested that this type of language operated as code-words and was thus used in covert newspaper attacks on Jews.¹⁴³

The second point of discussion relevant to this changing presentation of Jews as enemies is around external factors which may account for the changes. Following the Olympia rally of 1934 and the loss of some mainstream and press support, the BUF had less to lose and more to gain by making these types of attacks explicit.¹⁴⁴ Drabik argues further that one East End BUF speaker received a strongly positive response from locals to the use of anti-Semitic language in his street corner speeches, which influenced the rhetoric of others.¹⁴⁵ Further,

¹⁴⁰ *Action* #64, 8 May 1937, 9.

¹⁴¹ Roger Eatwell, "Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4 no. 2 (1992): 161–194.

¹⁴² *The Blackshirt* #64, 13 July 1934, 11.

¹⁴³ Drabik, "Spreading the Faith," 217.

¹⁴⁴ Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (London: Barrie & Rockliffe, 1961), 116.

¹⁴⁵ Drabik, "Spreading the Faith," 217.

the influence of an existing 'anti-Semitic clique' within the BUF leadership continued to grow in this period also.¹⁴⁶

The influence of foreign, 'successful' fascist movements in Italy and Germany also must be accounted for. From its inception, the BUF received covert funding from Mussolini and the Italian fascists, who were also not explicitly anti-Semitic at that point in time. However, perhaps due to a poor return on the Italian fascists' investment, by 1935 Mussolini's interest in the BUF had waned and Mosley instead looked to the Nazis for support. This was forthcoming in the form of further financial aid. This change, which also saw the official renaming of the BUF to the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists, encouraged more active anti-Semitism, along official Nazi party lines, within the BUF.¹⁴⁷ Whichever of these two factors had the most influence, it is clear that by 1937 the Jewish people, now presented as being also responsible for Communism and 'international financial democracy', had become the primary enemy of the BUF.

The BUF's rhetoric around the 'Old Gangs', the press and Communism is mostly consistent, however there are changes in the way *the Blackshirt* covers 'the Jewish issue'. Another primary ongoing trend which can be highlighted is the rhetorical conglomeration of all enemies into one combined force which is presented as working together against the interests of Britain and the British public. This is achieved through the inclusion of Jewish elements and influences in the actions and motivation of other enemies. Mosley uses this form of combined attack, with *the Blackshirt* quoting from one speech in May 1937: "let us ask those who think we are unfair, whether it is pure coincidence that Jews are prominent in international finance and prominent also in the control of the Socialist and Communist Parties? Is it mere coincidence that a Jew invented the class war theory and that in the days of Merrie England, when Britain was united and happy, they had long been forbidden to enter the country? How can we study and combat social decay without examining what parasites cause, or at least accompany decay? Why, when we consider social wrongs, should

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Gary Love, "'What's the Big Idea?': Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism." *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 3 (2007): 456-457.

the Jews in finance or in Communism alone, in the view of the Old Parties, be immune from criticism?"¹⁴⁸

Chapter Five – Conclusions

The two main newspapers of the British Union of Fascists, *the Blackshirt* and *Action* provide a clear insight into the way the BUF presented the party, its policies and its values to the public of Britain. Both the contents of the newspapers, and the writers' rhetorical techniques in constructing them, allow us to draw conclusions about the nature of the BUF and generally about the Fascist movement in Britain in the 1930s. The publications of the BUF are filled with claims that society is in decline. These claims are directed at all levels of society, from apocalyptic predictions of general social collapse, through to articles proclaiming a micro-economic decline, affecting those working in a single industry and in a single area of the nation. This obsession with decline is exactly as Roger Griffin and Robert Paxton described in each of their general definitions of fascist movements. There is also a strong element of palingenesis, or claims by the BUF as to the need for 'regeneration' through fascism, in their newspapers. This theme of salvation, the idea that "Fascism Alone Will Save This Country,"¹⁴⁹ is as persistent as their claims of social decline. Both the decline and need for regeneration theses are consistent in their presentation and frequency of appearance throughout the publication history of each newspaper, despite changing economic, social and political conditions in Britain throughout the period. It is these two co-dependent theses which form the main focus and purpose for *Action* and *the Blackshirt*.

The BUF's approach was nothing new or unexpected in terms of fascist rhetoric generally, with most of the evidence affirming the definitions of Griffin and Paxton, and thus aligning with what could be expected of a self-consciously fascist organisation, drawing a large amount of influence from Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. If nothing else, it provides a clear and unequivocal example in the English language in support of these existing theories and definitions of Fascism. In addition to this obsessive focus on decline and generation, *the Blackshirt* and *Action* are overt in their identification of those

¹⁴⁸ *Action* #64, May 8 1937, 9.

¹⁴⁹ *The Blackshirt* #21, September 16 1933, 3.

responsible for Britain's ills. This responsibility is the basis for the accusations levelled by the BUF against those who clearly emerge as the primary enemy – 'the Old Gang' government and mainstream press, Communists and Socialists, and the Jews. Generally these enemies are present from the start, and remain consistently the target of BUF newspaper attacks up to 1940. It is only their treatment of Jews as enemy which sees any identifiable changes rhetorically from 1933 to 1936. There are several potential or contributing causes to this rhetorical change. It is most likely, however, that such a change was one in presentation alone, rather than in actual belief amongst BUF leadership.

This paper provides a broad description of the BUF's published rhetoric around social decline, the need for regeneration and those they saw as the enemy. It does not, however, address some of the wider questions which arise as a result of the analysis presented. One key question which could be asked in future is whether such rhetoric within BUF propaganda was effective in gaining and maintaining membership? We know that the BUF were effective in building membership numbers during the early years, which were a time of economic uncertainty and unstable government in Britain.¹⁵⁰ It was only dedicated anti-fascist organisation and "the tendency for Fascist gatherings to be outnumbered by anti-fascist crowds" which halted this momentum.¹⁵¹ However, following a slump in 1934, membership did continue to grow again up until World War 2.¹⁵² A greater understanding of the role of the BUF's palingenetic propaganda in winning the support of new members could add valuable insight into the role of such rhetoric in the success or otherwise of nascent fascist movements.

¹⁵⁰ Martin Pugh, "The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia debate."

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² G. C. Webber, "Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists," 577.

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